

Illegal logging: We're guilty

Deforestation is so widespread, most people unwittingly buy into it

ELISABETH BRAW
Metro World News



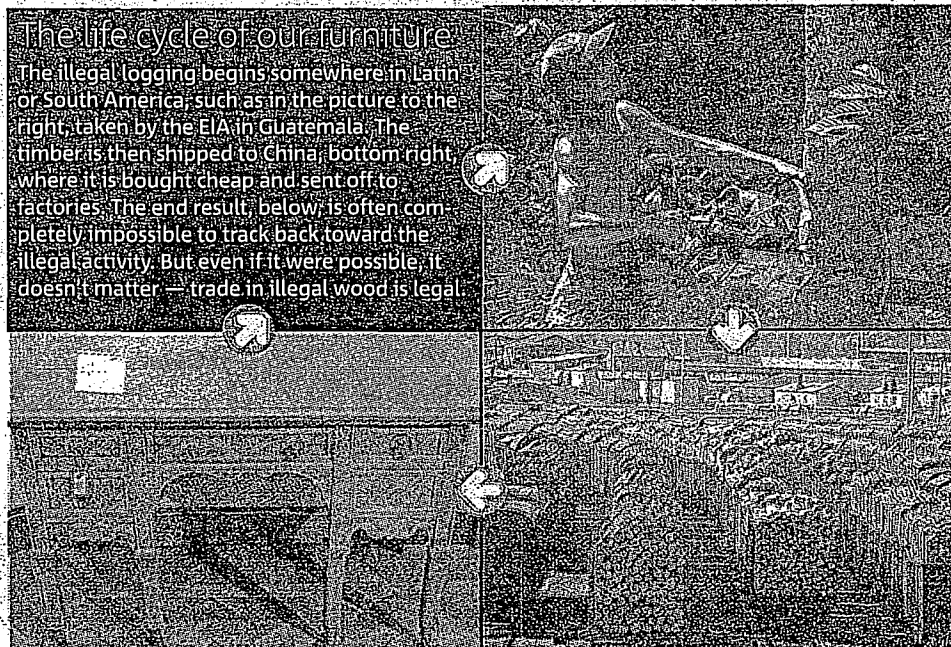
His great-great-great-uncle, Otto von Bismarck, shaped the 19th century as Germany's legendary chancellor. Alexander von Bismarck influences politics, too: He's campaigning to stop the global trade in illegal wood.

Your desk may well be made of illegally harvested wood. Your bed, too. But you might never know.

"We consumers unwittingly contribute to the destruction of forests around the world," says Alexander von Bismarck, executive director of the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA). "Illegal logging is extremely widespread. Since illegal wood is cheap, furniture made from such wood is everywhere."

The life cycle of our furniture

The illegal logging begins somewhere in Latin or South America, such as in the picture to the right, taken by the EIA in Guatemala. The timber is then shipped to China, bottom right, where it is bought cheap and sent off to factories. The end result, below, is often completely impossible to track back toward the illegal activity. But even if it were possible, it doesn't matter — trade in illegal wood is legal.



The World Bank estimates that wood worth about \$15 billion is each year illegally harvested by mafia-like international networks. Usually it's made into furniture in Chi-

na and then exported.

No one investigates these crimes — except von Bismarck and his colleagues at the EIA. They go undercover in the countries affected and docu-

ment suspect activities with hidden cameras. "The same people who smuggle guns are involved with illegal logging," explains von Bismarck, 37. "They're very violent."

Illegal logging is particularly common in Central Africa, Central America, Russia and Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, lowland forests are expected to be gone within 10 years, depriving the orangutan of its habitat.

But the logging is not only a threat to the environment.

"It creates conflicts within the countries," says von Bismarck. "But local leaders are almost powerless against the loggers." So are consumers. Even if they find out that their furniture is illegally logged, there's nothing they can do. Trade in illegal wood is — legal.

Until now. Last summer, the U.S. adopted a law banning trade in illegal wood, and von Bismarck hopes that other countries will follow suit. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change the global timber industry." And save the environment.